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ABSTRACT

Creative dance improvisation involves both the movement of the body with awareness and the awakening of the creative spirit. The basic elements of creative dance improvisation--force, time, and space--are examined with a view toward how this approach to dance can be a means for growth in the general education of anyone throughout their lives. Creative dance improvisation is shown to address students' needs for self-expression as well as the need to learn to creatively work within a group. Examples of how each dance element can be applied to the school curriculum are provided as well as examples of how the elements of dance relate to multiple intelligences. This approach to dance speaks to and develops both the individual and communal sides of human nature; dancers can feel a bond that can last a lifetime. This paper also describes the demonstration dances presented at the China-U.S. Conference on Education and suggests movement explorations for the reader to try in order to understand the concepts more fully. (Author/EMK)

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Chapter Three

Creative Dance Improvisation: Fostering Creative Expression, Group Cooperation, and Multiple Intelligences

Mary Ann Brehm & Charlene M. Kampfe

Abstract

The basic elements of creative dance improvisation are examined with a view towards how this approach to dance can benefit human development. Creative dance improvisation is shown to address students' needs for self-expression as well as the need to learn to creatively work within a group. Examples of how each dance element can be applied to the school curriculum are provided as well as examples of how the elements of dance relate to multiple intelligences. This paper also describes the demonstration dances presented at the conference and suggests movement explorations for the reader to try in order to understand the concepts more fully.

Creative dance improvisation involves both the movement of the body with awareness and the awakening of the creative spirit. Because of this, it satisfies two of humanity's basic needs–the need to move and the need to create and make order or form from experiences. This paper focuses on understanding what creative dance improvisation is and how it can be a means for growth in the general education of anyone throughout their lives. In our lecture demonstration at the China-U.S. Conference on Education we talked about dance and how it could be related to the school curriculum. We also demonstrated improvised dances, showed slides, and asked the audience to participate in movement explorations. This account of that presentation includes references to both the improvised demonstration dances, indicated in parentheses, and also to the movement cues given to the participants, indicated in brackets. It is hoped that these references will give you, the reader, a sense of dance as an activity and also encourage you to take the opportunity to try some of the movement problems yourself as you read.

In creative dance, the dancers improvise. That means the movementsare created as they are dancing, rather than being a pre-determined form. How do they do this? By paying attention to the sensations in their bodies and letting them guide them to find movements that are satisfying and are meaningful. It involves using all the senses, especially the sense that tells where

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one is in space and how one is moving. This is called the kinesthetic sense or the movement sense. When using the kinesthetic sense, the mind pays attention to the information that the nerves are feeding to the brain about the moving parts of the body. The mind is stimulated by these sensations with associations that are always subjective. One person's experience of moving their arm is not like another's experience. How it feels to move today is not exactly how it felt yesterday, although there are, of course, commonalties between people and between days. The movement sensations felt through the kinesthetic sense often have an emotional quality or feeling tone. Creative dance evokes skilled use of the mind as it focuses on, and is aware of, the movements being done. It uses states of emotions and feeling as guides for creating movement.

Calling upon body, mind and emotions and unifying them through movement expression helps people connect with their creative spirit. Dancing in this way develops the realization of who one is at the deepest levels. This is its value both to individuals and to groups learning to dance creatively together in a cooperative way. When dance is approached in this way, it is an activity of great value for everyone; not something to be taught to a few who intend to become dance professionals. This is why it is so important to continue to work for teaching creative dance in public school. In addition to approaching dance as pure movement expression, creative dance can also be used in education to teach the general curriculum. By bringing the power of deep involvement of the subject being studied, it helps students connect to stories they are reading or writing, history they are studying, math they are learning, and science they are exploring.

Several elements are involved in our approach to creative dance improvisation. One of the hall marks of creative dance is that although it addresses a very intuitive, subjective aspect of human life, it can be approached through a very objective analysis of human movement expression. Because of this, it is readily applicable to many non-dance areas of education. The elements we use in teaching creative dance are the body and the movement elements of force, time and space. Movement is the primary characteristic of life and of the structure of the universe. These same elements of force, time and space apply to all movements, not just dance movements. Because of this link to all kinds of movement,creative dance improvisation can easily be applied to other areas. This kind of analysis often helps people without movement training to understand this approach to dance.

The Body Element

Every art form has an instrument with which to create its particular form of art. In dance, the instrument is the body. In teaching creative dance, we often begin by exploring how different parts of the body want to move. As the students are doing this, they pay attention to the kinesthetic sensations they are getting as they move and that guides them in how they want to continue moving. In order to feel the movement fully, it is often useful to close the eyes.

We invite you to try some of these movements of parts of the body. Close your eyes as you try each of these suggestions in order to sense the movement more fully.

> Move your head and feel what that feels like. Now move your shoulders..... Feel your shoulders moving..... Move your torso, this moves your spine. You can bend it and arch it. Move it carefully, feeling the movement the whole time.....Now move your arms, move them anyway that feels good. Stop..... Hold your arms wherever they are. Close your eyes and feel the position of your arms in space. Now move your arms again..... Stop again and feel where they are.

You have just gone through the beginnings of waking up your body so that it can be used as an instrument to express something through dance. You have experienced what it feels like to pay attention to the kinesthetic sense. Our teacher, Barbara Mettler, calls this the *tune-up* and it is much like how an orchestra tunes up before it begins playing a symphony, or how we tune-up a car to make sure it runs properly. We often recommend to teachers that they begin their school day with a chance for the students to tune-up their bodies.

It is also important to get the whole body moving. This can be done by asking students to explore movements of different action words such as *stretch*.

> You can begin that exploration by first reaching with your arms, then your whole body, and feeling yourself stretching. Stretch freely in ways that feel good to stretch.....
>
> Now try a movement that has a very different feeling from stretch, *Shake*. Shake your hands..... Shake everything that can shake..... You can let your voice shake too.

There are many action words that are good for stimulating movement such as twisting, flopping, bouncing, swinging. Each one has adifferent feeling to it. Thinking of movement in terms of these action words is a useful way of finding a link to a curricular area you are studying. Everything in the world moves. If you can name the action words that describe what you are studying, you can explore them in the same way as stretching and shaking. For example, in the story, *The Little Red Hen*, the red hen does planting movements, harvesting movements, sweeping movements, and the baking movements such as stirring and pouring. Each of these movements can be abstracted and done with the whole body or different body parts. Looking for the action words in a story or identifying the actions of a subject matter is one of the easiest ways to relate dance to a curriculum. (Demonstration dance of *Sweeping Movements*)

The Force Element

We also teach creative dance by looking at one element of movement at a time.

The most primary element of movement involves the way energy or the force of a movement is expended. We call this the Force Element. Movements with a lot of force have a very different feeling than movements with just a little force. In dance we can explore this polarity of feeling by first doing forceful movements such as pushing, pulling, punching, slashing; and then contrasting that feeling with the feeling of light, gentle movements such as floating, fluttering, and dabbing. Dance classes can also explore how these forces interact when groups dance both in a conflicting and cooperative manner. (Dance using a variety of amounts of force both cooperatively and in conflict.)

The force element has a very dramatic, emotional quality to it. In relationship to the curriculum it is useful in exploring the dramatic qualities of characters from a story or historical period. It can also be used to express the forces of nature such as the strong force of a hurricane, or volcano; or the light force of a gentle breeze. (Wind Dance demonstration)

The Time Element

Another way to look at movement is to pay attention to when it is happening and how slow or fast it is going. This is the Time Element of movement.

> Try moving your hands and arms very slowly and feel that feeling of slowness.....
> Now move them fast and experience the difference in how slow movements feel and fast movements feel.....

Working with time often gets one into playing with the beat patternsof movement. For example slow and fast movements can be mixed and put them into patterns such as "slow, slow, quick quick, slow" or "quick slow, quick slow, quick slow".

> You may want to try clapping a few beat patterns.....

Working with the beat stimulates attentiveness and gives an appreciation for hearing and feeling patterns in the body. This is good practice for seeing patterns in other areas of life and stimulating logical and mathematical thinking.

It takes movement of the hands and arms to make the sound of the clapping. In fact, movement and sound are totally linked. In creative dance improvisation dancers sometimes make sound with hands, feet, other parts of the body and voices. Here they begin to find the link between music and dance. Music can be created while dancing, so that in creative dance, as we approach it, pre-recorded music is rarely used. Whether the sound of movement

is audible or not we often are listening to the rhythmic time beat patterns that ebb and flow in our dancing. This gives dancing a liveliness and allows us to discover the rhythms of our own creative spirit.

The rhythm of the time pattern can also be linked to the rhythm of words. Students can get a greater appreciation for poetry and the beauty of words through putting those rhythms into movements. (Improvisation using the nursery rhyme *Peas Porridge Hot* as the basis for the time pattern)

In the Peas Porridge Hot Dance, we listened to the patterns we were making with sound and discovered new and interesting ways of working with those patterns. This idea of listening and discovering is very important to creative dance. If dancers listen to the kinesthetic feedback from the muscles and allow the body to discover the movement possibilities being shown to them, the feeling they get is not so much that they are creating the movements but that the movements are being created through them. Their bodies are being used as instruments of expression. They are discovering the movements that are there for them to do. This experience can be applied to approaching all of life—discovering the work that is there to do, the reason for being placed on this earth at this time.

The Space Element

The third element of movement concentrates on where the movement is happening. It is the Space Element and relates dance to the visual arts such as drawing, painting, and sculpture. Just as dancers can listen to the time beat pattern they can also attend to the spatial patterns of theirmovements to discover where it feels right for their movements to be in space. They can feel the rhythmic flow of movement from curved to straight, or large to small, high to low, or going forwards to going backwards or sidewards. (Human Sculptures Duet, making shapes with the body in relationship to each other.)

Children love to make human sculptures together. It gives them a structure to relate to others that is both safe and friendly. In the United States, our culture is in enough flux that people don't often have a clear sense of where they want to be or how to relate other people. Sometimes they get too close and conflicts arise. Fights start. Other times people are too distant and there is no communication between people and they don't understand each other. By working with spatial studies in movement students can practice skills in knowing where they are in space, where they are going, and how close or far away they want to be from the people they are dancing with. These skills are analogous to those used in getting along with people in the rest of life.

In terms of the curriculum, spatial studies can be used in relationship to writing words or numbers. Making the shape of letters with the body is probably the most common use of creative dance in the United States. Teachers can also have children write words very large in the air with different parts of their body to practice handwriting , spelling, or vocabulary words. For example one can write the word *Beijing* with the head. (Demonstration of writing "Beijing" in both English and Chinese with the head moving through the air.)

In addition, anything that can be represented visually can be represented through movement or shapes of the body in space. In a very successful lesson on Land forms, fifth graders make themselves into the spatial form of different land forms such as mountains, canyons, buttes, spires, and arches. The students then erode into flat planes by slowly sinking down to the ground. Spatial studies are often good for teachers and students who are a little nervous about working with creative movement because the held positions can be more controlled and people may feel less vulnerable than in freer more exuberant movement expression.

Creative Dance and the Multiple Intelligences

In looking at these different ways to approach the teaching of creative dance improvisation you can see that creative dance can appeal to people with many different learning styles or many modes of intelligence. Because it involves movement of the body, it is accessible by people who think through movement, who need to get up and move around to processinformation, who remember something best if they do it or manipulate it. Most children benefit greatly by being able to take something that they are learning and move those ideas with their bodies. Dance improvisation also taps other ways of processing information. The work with the Space Element appeals to the part of people's thinking that relates to visual learning and remembering by seeing images in the mind. Time beat patterns relate to musical and rhythmic abilities as well as to logical patterning. The emphasis on language in the teaching of creative dance helps stimulate students' verbal abilities. Some people are contemplative and introspective. They use what Howard Gardner calls intra-personal intelligence. Creative dance works very deeply with self knowledge and self awareness by using the kinesthetic sense as a guide for how movements are formed into dance experiences. On the other hand, the ability to work and relate cooperatively with others is called upon and developed in group dance improvisation. Because dance communicates non-verbally, people who participate in group dance improvisation learn to relate on a level much deeper than verbal communication. Their inter-personal intelligence is called upon at that deep level.

Group Dance Improvisation

This emphasis on group dance improvisation is one of the hallmarks of the work of Barbara Mettler. From her we learned how groups can improvise together without preplanning and without talking. The way this is taught is by working with the elements we have shown, beginning individually, and then working with partners, and then larger and larger groups. People who explore this kind of dancing have to become very receptive to what is happening around them in the rest of the group. They have to sense not only what is happening in their body, but in the whole group body. Then they have to do what they can to contribute to the themes that the whole group is discovering. This is a

very challenging endeavor for those of us in the United States because our culture very much values and promotes individual expression and does not support us in the skills for learning to work cooperatively as a creatively functioning group.

There were many speakers at the China-U.S. Conference on Education who spoke to issues of character education. In his opening keynote remarks, Hal Urban spoke to the point that schools have done a passable job teaching students to be smart but have failed in teaching them to be good. Several Chinese speakers expressed a concern for reforms in their system so that the individual creativity and original thinking could be enhanced without sacrificing benefits for the whole society. At the closing session, Yao Wen-jun expressed the view that people can develop their individuality within the collective.

It has been our experience that creative dance can be a means of encouraging both individual and community richness and growth. Creative dance improvisation work begins with cultivating the individual's ability to feel the sensations of their own movements and to learn to make movement choices based upon those sensations. This builds a strong sense of self. Building from this strong self, creative dance education soon begins to build the skills of dancing in groups. In group dancing, students need to become responsive to external stimulus. Partner and group studies in the force, time, and space elements cultivate that group awareness. Dance studies can focus on using force cooperatively, synchronizing with others around a time-beat pattern, or relating to others in spatial studies such as "Human Sculptures".

All these activities build the skills necessary for individuals to participate in creatively functioning groups. In addition, creative dance works not only with individual bodies in movement but also with group body forms. "Opening and closing" is an example of a set of movements that are basic to both individual and group bodies. In the individual, the parts of the body get farther apart and closer together as one opens and closes.

> You may want to experience this by slowly opening and closing your hands..... Then take the movement into the arms, opening and closing the arms.....Then let the whole body open away from the center of the body and close towards the center.

Opening and closing a group is some what different. The emphasis is not on the parts of the body coming together and apart, but the people coming together and apart, the group getting larger and smaller. The specific movements of separate body parts become less important to what the whole body is contributing to the group shape. In working with group forms in dance improvisation, dancers learn how to create forms cooperatively with others which they would be unable to produce as an individual mover. An individual cannot be a line, circle, or clump of dancers. The individual needs to be a part of a group in order to feel the wonder of creating with those forms.

This approach to dance speaks to and develops both the individual and communal sides of human nature. After having had the experience of creating improvised dances together, dancers can feel a bond that can last a lifetime. One of the greatest challenges and opportunities for growth is to build upon those bonds formed in dancing and use them as guides for building healthy, full lives as individuals, as partners, as families, as friendship groups and as communities.

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